



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Artist Carmen Leon talks with student Jessica Bungcayao at an art workshop Thursday at Freedom Elementary.

Vacation unleashes artistic talent

By JONDI GUMZ
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FREEDOM — Brilliant watercolors filled the floor, strewn with self-portraits and rainforest scenes.

Artist Carmen Leon leaned over one unfinished work, explaining how to create contrast, as children lined up patiently to present their masterpieces for her review.

So much was created that teacher Steffen Lovell arranged for an impromptu art show for parents in the school office Friday.

"It's blowing me away," he said. "I had no idea."

Freedom Elementary School in the Pajaro Valley district is officially on vacation, but the doors were open for a group of fifth graders participating in a special art workshop that met every morning for a week.

Leon is a veteran instructor with the Cultural Council's Spectra program, which brings art education into schools. Many schools arrange for once-a-week art lessons, but Leon said it's unusual to have classes for a full week.

"This sequential follow-through, and the concentration and focus of time — it's fantastic," she said.

The workshop was Lovell's idea. A new teacher from Fresno, he was assigned to work with students in the Gifted and Talented Educa-

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tion program. He planned to focus on math and science, to balance the district's emphasis on reading. But when he met the children in September, they told him they loved art.

A week of classes, he figured, would give children an intensive art experience and something to do during the long winter break.

"A month of vacation is really long," he said. The program cost the school \$520. Lovell had expected to pay \$1,000 for two artists to work with 60 students. But although fifth graders in gifted programs at other district schools were invited, only three came.

With 21 students in all, Leon was in constant demand.

"Look at your painting again. What can you do to make it more complete?" she asked one youngster. What are your choices? Make it brighter? Outline it? Or a darker background..."

Eight-year-old Martha Andrade explained — step by step — how she drew her self-portrait, using her hand to measure her face. For details like eyebrows, you look in the mirror, she said.

When Leon was busy, students asked their classmates for advice.

Eleven-year-old Amanda Hendryx had trouble deciding on a color for mountains.

"Goldish, purple, white on top, like the Himalayas, those are your choices," Leon pointed out. "If you do blue sky, can you do blue mountains?"

Amanda shook her head.

"Don't make the sky blue. Make it like a sunset," Sonia Martinez, sitting next to her, advised.

Clara Zarate's painting of a tropical bird stood out, with orange feathers next to a tall purple plant.

"She helped me decide," Clara said, pointing to classmate Ruby Roberts.

Yet their artistic styles were not at all similar. Ruby, for example, took a realistic approach to painting a basket of poinsettias while Clara's flowers looked surreal, floating in an egg shape surrounded by a rainbow of colors.

To each youngster, Leon offered encouragement. "You're going to experiment," she said.

Lovell admits he's no artist, but this venture more than met his expectations.

"Every kid is successful with a painting," he said. "In the classroom, that's rare."